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Parliaments Facing the Virtual Challenge: A Conceptual Approach for New Models of Representation

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The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically accelerated digital transformations in all spheres of public and private life, providing a strong incentive also for parliaments to adopt digital and remote working methods. The entry of the virtual paradigm into parliamentary work is part of a scenario already marked by a crisis of the traditional political representation model, also as a consequence of the disintermediation phenomena induced by the digital revolution. This article aims at investigating some conceptual links between the crisis of parliamentary representation and the digital transition and at analysing pros and cons of virtual/hybrid parliamentary proceedings and investigating with a non-empirical approach some potential systemic effects that could derive from maintaining them even after the current pandemic is over. Finally, the article suggests that the virtual challenge could encourage the evolution of parliaments towards new hybrid and network-based representation models which might help in providing a new centrality to legislatures in 21st century democratic systems.

Keywords: Disintermediation, Hybrid Proceedings, Political Representation, Public Engagement, Virtual Parliament

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated transformations that were already taking place in the organisation of social, political and economic life under the impetus of the digital revolution over the last two decades, and parliaments could not escape the new challenges posed by the health emergency. In order to meet the need for social distancing restrictions imposed by government authorities and to prevent the spread of contagions from completely paralysing parliamentary activity, many parliaments, starting in the spring of 2020, have had to readjust the way

in which they conduct their work. This has occurred in a number of ways: by reorganising parliamentary spaces and limiting the number of parliamentarians admitted to attend physical sessions, and by also resorting, to varying degrees from country to country, to forms of remote participation—and sometimes remote voting—through the use of videoconferencing systems and other digital platforms and web-based applications.

This article is not aimed at conducting an empirical survey of the experiences accumulated so far by parliaments during the current emergency. Instead, it aims to carry out a conceptual analysis in order to outline—in a parliamentary theory framework—a provisional cost–benefit analysis of the introduction of virtual parliamentary proceedings and to understand whether and to what extent these emergency digital transformations may prove capable of surviving somehow even after the pandemic has ceased, becoming one of the options ordinarily available to parliaments. Some conceptual hypotheses will also be formulated in terms of whether these innovations might, in a longer-term perspective, anticipate a more profound evolution in the very nature of parliaments, enabling them to renew and strengthen the foundations of their legitimacy in 21st century democratic systems.

In this broader perspective, this work addresses a topic area that is still underexplored in the literature, which has so far focused on digital constitutionalism in the dimension of individual rights and the relationship between authority and freedom, without devoting specific attention to the impact of the digital revolution on the very organisation and constitutional functioning of public institutions.

The starting hypothesis of the present reflections is that the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic represent a valuable window of opportunity to speed up the processes of digital updating of parliamentary institutions, which until now have lagged behind in the name of procedural traditionalism.

On the one hand, and in the shorter term, the pandemic crisis makes it no longer possible to postpone the definition of a coherent set of rules and tools enabling representative assemblies to promptly respond to the challenges posed by any crisis or emergency situation that might prevent them from carrying out their work in accordance with the ordinary canon of in-person attendance. This imposes on parliaments the task of drawing up a set of emergency procedures that combine the need for immediacy required by the extraordinary nature of the phenomena to be faced in case of crisis with the traditional logic of adversarial debate and mediation being typical of parliamentary work under ordinary conditions.

On the other hand, it seems necessary to start reflecting, over a longer-term perspective, on a possible development strategy for a gradual introduction into parliamentary proceedings of new forms of digital participation and interaction.

Such a strategy is particularly required in order to increase the ability of parliaments to absorb the impact of new technologies set to grow exponentially in the coming years—particularly artificial intelligence-based solutions, which are already being tested in the areas of legislative drafting.

This strategy should define a path towards a balanced hybridisation of physical and virtual attendance to parliaments' activities, with the goal of helping to bridge the representative gap that has been widening as a result of the massive social and political disintermediation of the early 21st century.

2. Virtuality and parliamentary representation

It is a common observation that in the digital age the boundary between real and virtual is becoming increasingly illusory. The overcoming of a clear dividing line between reality and representation of reality affects every field of knowledge and human activity, and now seems to become applicable also to the category of political representation, which on several occasions gives way to 'representation' meant as an act of faithful reproduction of the original. The sphere of necessary indeterminacy that characterised the classic representative relationship—in which, under the trustee representation model, the representative retains a wide discretion in interpreting the interests of the represented—is undermined, in a context marked by the mass communicative disintermediation induced by the widespread use of digital tools, by self-representative claims of individuals, social groups, professional categories, territorial communities, and so on, who refuse representative mediation and prefer the direct self-representation of their own singular subjective reality.

In this regard, it would seem useful as a preface, just in order to place the deep roots of these phenomena within a broader theoretical framework, to make some preliminary notes on the origin and transformations of the concept of political representation.

It is well known that the concept of political representation was born in the Middle Ages in close connection with the concept of meeting in a single physical place—the assembly—of representatives that were not elected, but appointed with mandates of a substantially private type (Kelsen, 1966), to whom the task of advising the sovereign in fiscal decisions and in the administration of justice was entrusted. Then, with the advent of modern liberal constitutionalism, political representation began to qualify as elective insofar as it expressed the interests of the emerging bourgeoisie. Finally, with the extension of the right to vote and then the conquest of universal suffrage, political representation, without any mandate constraint, became the mechanism through which parliament expressed the general and non-fragmentable will of the people, who had become the depository of sovereignty.

As a broad approximation, therefore, it can be stated that in medieval parliaments the notion of representation initially alluded to the ineliminable physical presence of the representative, so that—under the guidance of written instructions—he acted in the name and on behalf of the represented, who in turn were absent from the place where the decision was made. The original idea of representation from the earliest medieval assemblies in fact alluded to a situation in which the presence in the assembly of the representatives simulated the presence of the represented even though they were physically absent. Not surprisingly, it has been noted that the very generic meaning of the verb 'to represent' is to make present an entity that for whatever reason is bodily absent (Leibholz, 1960; Pitkin, 1967) and that to represent 'means to make visible and illustrate an invisible being by means of a being that is publicly present' (Schmitt, 1928).

The very idea of parliamentary representation, from its origins, thus seems to refer to a concept of 'simulation of presence' that returns today in an overbearing way as a criterion of discrimination between real and virtual in the digital domain.

Then, with the introduction, by modern constitutionalism, of the prohibition of mandate constraints, the aforementioned link between political representation and physical presence weakens. The representative becomes the one representing the entire nation, that is, an indeterminate subject who will later be called the 'electoral body', with a not accidental reference to the notion of corporeality. The representative assembly, born as the physical meeting place of the representatives, thus becomes a 'virtual' place insofar as it no longer expresses a circumscribed and predeterminable portion of represented subjects, but rather the entire nation 'with one interest, that of a whole' (Burke, 1774)—and not even just the electoral body, with which the nation in turn maintains a relationship of virtual identification.

Yet, the virtual applied to representative processes reveals an inherent polysemy which leaves this concept irreducible to a merely representative delegation logic. If, at the beginning of modern constitutionalism, politics was characterised by a notion of virtual representation designed to exclude, whereby the rich and privileged voted on behalf of the disenfranchised majority (Coleman, 2005), today that same notion explicitly evokes a logic of mirroring, widening of the representative base, active interaction and inclusive participation.

Just as representation refers, therefore, to a fiction—that is, the one consisting in simulating the absorption of the will of the represented into the will of the representatives—so virtuality, up to the theses that oppose digital democracy to representative democracy, alludes to the possibility that representation may be eventually converted into a genuine self-representation of each individual's views within the decision-making process.

The advent of technologies being capable of allowing anyone to express their will or opinion in a delocalised, asynchronous and permanent manner to parliamentary decision-makers—well beyond the use of traditional instruments like referendum, petitions and popular legislative initiative—thus poses a new and inescapable existential challenge: how to preserve the degree of legitimacy of the representative will being expressed by parliament without the new disintermediated and virtual forms of political participation undermining its foundations?

And again: at a time when we are witnessing an identity deflagration of pluralism and the crisis of the represented 'makes problematic the identification of the subject to be represented' (Luciani, 2001), the subject of representation 'has itself become a site of controversy' (Baker, 2006) and this identity outbreak is coupled with the incommunicability between ideological and cultural bubbles inflated by the digital environment, does it still make sense to speak of position synthesis and negotiation as main paradigms of the parliamentary representative function?

Simplifying to the extreme, two alternative answers can be given to these questions.

One can entrench oneself in an all-out defence of the representative principle in its classical sense, believing that the introduction of virtual forms of participation and representation would end up unhinging the already precarious balance of the representative democratic circuit.

Alternatively, one could try to gradually absorb the potential of the new forms of participation—through a 're-engineering' of parliamentary proceedings—into new hybrid models aimed at bridging the representation gap and also at neutralising the crisis, in many ways irreversible, of political parties. In such hybrid models, alongside the traditional mechanisms of political representation, there might be mechanisms of civic engagement and self-representation of increasingly sectoral demands from civil society, as an embodiment of parliament's new tasks of mediation between society and government (Leston-Bandeira, 2016).

The need to start imagining hybrid parliamentary models in which physical and virtual presence and 'representation' and 'self-representation' coexist in a mutually enriching exchange stems from here: from the need to broaden the range of representative forms in an attempt to link the subjects of a pluralism that has become so exponential that it can no longer be represented with the schemes inherited from the past. And it also stems from the need to prevent the digital transition now irreversibly underway, instead of constituting a moment of evolution of the tools available to parliaments, from finding the latter unprepared and becoming, in the medium to long term, a threat to their very existence.

The challenge, therefore, lies in making it possible for parliamentary representation to find a new and broader basis of democratic legitimacy which, through the careful use of a panoply of digital tools and technologies 'around virtual, augmented, mixed, and extended reality' (Koryzis *et al.*, 2021), may be able to

embrace, in modular forms, a wider spectrum of a reality that has become both pulviscular and liquid, hyper-sectoralised and polarised.

3. The digital transition of parliaments: a comparative analysis of operational biases and potential systemic benefits

The use of remote proceedings during the COVID-19 pandemic has been a powerful factor in accelerating the digitalisation of parliaments worldwide, for which the hybrid parliament model successfully tested in the UK certainly paved the way.[1]

As already pointed out, it is not the purpose of this article to review the different experiences of virtual or hybrid proceedings recorded over the last year and a half in parliaments around the world as a result of the coronavirus emergency.

However, beyond the greater or lesser success of the solutions temporarily adopted, an overview of the experiences of virtual participation to parliamentary work recorded in the current emergency phase allows some provisional conclusions to be drawn in terms of a comparative analysis of operational biases and potential systemic benefits.

Of course, the following are purely non-empirical-based assumptions and—in particular those concerning the potential pros of virtual parliaments—are based on possible future scenarios that will have to be tested in the coming years through empirical investigations in order to determine whether what is assumed here in terms of conceptual trends will actually be reflected in the concrete evolution of the trajectory of parliaments in the adaptation process to digital innovations.

Starting with an analysis of the negative aspects of virtual parliamentary proceedings, the strongest objections concern specifically remote voting, considering that a non-negligible cost is the risk of substitution of person and of violation of confidentiality and—where applicable—of the secrecy of the vote cast by each MP. That is a risk which the technological solutions available at the moment do not seem to be able to entirely avoid, even in cases where parliaments use proprietary platforms and servers. This is clearly a crucial issue, which intercepts questions relating to the transparency of parliamentary activity and affects the very choice to open up parliaments to a full digital transformation, but which entails critical points that do not seem insuperable in view of the presumable availability

[1]For an analysis of the experience of the 'hybrid parliament' in the UK during the coronavirus emergency, with references also to the experiences of parliaments in other countries, see the volume 'Parliaments and the Pandemic', Study of Parliament Group, January 2021, at https://studyofparliamentgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Parliaments-and-the-Pandemic.pdf

in the coming years of cloud-based features capable of ensuring an optimal protection of confidentiality and security of remote voting applications.

Another immediate and undeniable cost that has been stressed by many is what we might call the 'relational cost' caused by the loss of spontaneity in parliamentary behaviour, with particular regard to those behaviours or attitudes which can be relevant to orient the debate and to shape the will of the assembly or the committee on a specific issue (non-verbal language, interruptions that encourage more in-depth discussions, etc.). The relational cost is inherent in the impersonal and detached nature that characterises the way any remote activity is generally carried out. This rarefaction of interpersonal contacts, if applied to remote parliamentary participation, in fact ends up preventing those moments of informal interaction between MPs, even belonging to different political groups, which traditionally are useful for mutual understanding and the achievement of political agreements functional to the good outcome of parliamentary decisions (Norton, 2019*a*,*b*; Norton, 2021). In this regard, it is no coincidence that many support a median interpretation that recognises the possibility of virtualising certain types of proceedings—in particular parliamentary oversight of executive branch actions—while expressing doubts about the virtualisation of the legislative process based on the argument that the lack of physical meetings and interactions would seriously damage parliamentary influence over legislative decision-making (Rozenberg, 2020).

Furthermore, as a consequence of the last critical aspect above considered, it cannot be ignored that in hybrid procedures—especially at an early stage when the full potential has not been experienced—there may be inequalities in access to talk and influence, due to the limited capacity for physical interaction by remotely participating MPs.

A further critical aspect that should not be underestimated is the risk that remote participation by civil society actors—primarily through committee hearings—may remain *de facto* limited to those with sufficient digital skills, or whose socio-economic and educational conditions allow them enough time and resources for effective and informed interaction with parliamentary bodies. In short, there is a risk that expanding the tools for civic engagement in parliamentary work through digital technologies could end up exacerbating inequalities to the detriment of the most vulnerable groups and the least informed or equipped individuals.

Despite the costs outlined above, there are, however, a number of benefits, some of which only potential, that appear, at least in a long-term perspective, likely to tip the balance in favour of opting for keeping hybrid parliamentary proceedings in place indefinitely.

First of all, as the pandemic emergency has clearly demonstrated, there seems to be broad agreement that the possibility of remote working, including remote

voting, offers parliaments a new tool to be used in emergencies where physical presence in parliamentary sittings is impossible for health, safety or security reasons, when it is necessary to proceed rapidly with the approval of urgent measures, thus guaranteeing the fundamental and symbolic continuity of parliamentary assemblies in democratic systems (Judge and Leston-Bandeira, 2021).

But, beyond the case of emergency situations—for which the use of forms of virtual participation seems almost inevitable—in the economy of the present work reflection must mainly focus on the possible medium- and long-term pros of a progressive virtualisation of parliamentary work. In this broader perspective, it seems useful to hypothesise some positive systemic effects that the stabilisation of virtual parliamentary proceedings may determine.

A first group of potential positive effects relates to the dimension of 'parliamentary ritual'. It has been noted above that the lack of physical interaction may constitute a relational impairment to the effectiveness of parliamentary work that needs to be taken seriously into account. But, overturning this argument, the lack—or even the mere attenuation—of physical interaction and the reduced incidence of visual contact can also be an advantage in perspective. In fact, remote attendance can, at least in some circumstances, be quite useful in fostering a 'downplaying' of parliamentary work, which is often characterised, especially in countries with greater political instability, by elements of theatricality, dramatisation and hardening of positions for the benefit of media visibility. Such dramatisations—resulting from confrontation and sometimes from even non-verbal behaviour, especially in plenary work—often lead to a state of incommunicability between political groups and individual MPs rather than a convergence of positions, and ultimately hinder the achievement of compromises and mediations that can strengthen the legitimacy of parliamentary work. The dramatisation of political confrontation is an unavoidable condition for the full expression of a plurality of voices and opinions in debates, but it must be followed by a phase of necessary emotional cooling of positions that favours, according to the thesis preferred here, the reaching of shared conclusions and thus a more incisive action by parliaments. If properly assisted by rules aimed at guaranteeing an orderly debate and equal rights of participation between the physically present MPs and those attending remotely, virtual parliamentary activity appears to have the potential, at least abstractly, to be a communicative cooling mechanism and act as a form of incentive to the de-ritualisation of proceedings with respect to those procedural rhythms that are better suited to being used as a tool for individual and symbolic narratives having little or nothing to do with the specific issues being debated in parliament.

This type of de-ritualisation—insofar as it does not compromise the fundamental function of parliamentary rituals to ensure the legitimacy of final

decisions and to secure the consent of those who lose out (Crewe, 2021)—may lead to the adoption of simpler languages and communicative modes within the reach of a non-specialist public, thus to help strengthen the transparency and intelligibility of parliamentary work and reduce the gap between parliaments and the public.

Another potential benefit coming from remote participation in parliamentary work might be to encourage a higher rate of attendance at sittings, especially of committees, where there are no votes or debates of major political relevance, where in-person attendance is generally already very low in many parliaments. This could help, for example, to improve the performance of inquiry and fact-finding committees' functions and facilitate, in more general terms, the participation of those MPs who, for health, caring responsibilities or any other reason, could not ensure their presence at a physical sitting. Once again, however, this is a purely conceptual prediction that would require an evidence-based assessment, particularly focusing on the risks to the quality of attendance posed by increased opportunities for multi-tasking remotely.

Finally, although in a purely abstract outlook, there might be a number of potential positive systemic benefits resulting from the structural insertion of virtual elements into the organisation and functioning of parliaments and that deserve to be investigated in a long-term perspective. These potential effects are not yet supported by any empirical evidence, but they should be considered within the framework of a development strategy aimed at outlining a path that could allow parliaments 'to anticipate and proactively meet the representative needs of complex and differentiated citizenries, which now includes helping them through the impact of a global pandemic' (Hasson, 2020).

By adopting such a strategic approach, some lines of evolution can already be outlined.

It has already been widely emphasised in the academic debate that digitising parliaments can be an effective response to the growing need to involve and listen to civic interests that do not find sufficient expression in the traditional circuits of political representation. In addition, the recognition of virtual forms of parliamentary engagement of civic interests can play down the consequences of electoral systems—particularly of pure majoritarian ones—in terms of the inclusion of smaller minorities in the representative circuit by means of participatory and non-electoral forms of representation (Urbinati and Warren, 2008).

But the systemic potential offered by the adoption of forms of remote participation to parliamentary work seems to lie in further, no less significant dimensions.

In the first place, with regard to federal systems and those recognising particular conditions of autonomy for regional and local communities, the possibility of virtual participation in parliamentary proceedings may represent an incentive for

the establishment of cooperative methods between local and national legislatures and their respective executives that do not require constant and time-consuming travel around the territory. More flexible and functional links between legislatures and executives could be established—for example, through the holding of joint virtual meetings of committees belonging to assemblies from different countries or levels of governance (Rozenberg, 2020)—providing solutions to the issue of the dominance of executives over sub-national legislatures in federal systems, which has long been highlighted in the literature (Bolleyer, 2010).

Secondly, as far as the internal organisation of parliaments is concerned, it would seem appropriate to build on the lessons learned during the pandemic according to which, compared to plenary, the path to remote committees was easier for most parliaments. Based on this legacy, remote proceedings may smooth the transition towards operational models in which parliamentary committees are reorganised according to criteria of higher numerical composition and by major public policies rather than by competences mirroring those of individual ministries or government departments. Such a different organisational model centred on a fewer number of committees with a broader area of competence may in turn enable parliaments to become more assertive on complex or cross-cutting issues (such as the emblematic one of combating the climate crisis) without losing the advantages of the smaller size of committees compared to plenary and the greater informality of their work.

Thirdly, from the point of view of the overall structure of parliamentary functions, the adoption of virtual proceedings could have an effect on the very deliberative methods used by parliaments. In the context of the ongoing trend that is seeing the legislative function shifting towards the executive and the consequent need for parliaments to claim a new role in the pre- and post-legislative scrutiny (De Vrieze and Norton, 2021; De Vrieze, 2020), remote working could accelerate the transition towards models in which a lower incidence of the decision-making phases of the legislative process is matched by an increase in scrutiny procedures, that have already received a boost from the digital solutions adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Griglio, 2020). Remote participation may eventually enhance the oversight activities of parliaments, which are more appropriately carried out in committees than in plenary and are much less affected by the trade-off between transparency and the legislative capacity of committees reported in literature (Fasone and Lupo, 2015). In other words, a new arrangement characterised by a lower incidence of legislative procedures and a corresponding increase in deliberative procedures (such as those related to the approval of non-legislative reports by committees) not being characterised by the rigid procedural mechanisms of the legislative process, may provide the ideal environment for the adoption of remote deliberative proceedings that meet less formal requirements. On the other hand, remote voting would also appear to be compatible with more

formal decision-making procedures when it is not a question of voting on dozens of articles and hundreds of amendments, but rather of a few solemn votes in aggravated quorum procedures (Lupo, 2020 *a*,*b*).

Finally, in the case of bicameral systems where parliamentary functions are split identically between the two different houses, the introduction of hybrid procedures, together with some amendments to parliamentary regulations, could facilitate the set-up and the functioning of bicameral parliamentary bodies charged with the task of remedying disharmonies and overlaps occuring in those systems, which are often at the origin of slowdowns or impasses in the legislative process.

4. Conclusions: future parliaments as physical hubs at the heart of virtual representative networks?

The coronavirus emergency has only been a detonator of contradictions that were already present in the way parliaments interpret their role in an age marked by impetuous transformations and global threats. The digital challenge requires parliaments to re-imagine themselves, in the medium and long term, from exclusively restricted physical places within the confines of institutional buildings into 'hybrid spaces' where physical presence is combined with virtual participation, in order to reconvert their nature as static assemblies into that of dynamic representative networks.

The 21st-century parliaments have the chance to set out on the road to becoming constitutional networks which, fully supported by digital technologies, can be entrusted, on the one hand, with the task of unifying the different levels of territorial representation and, on the other, with the aim of engaging in parliamentary decision-making processes particularly qualified individuals designated by their respective groups or categories according to a non-electoral participatory logic.

Looking into the future, what appears to be looming on the horizon of parliaments seems to be a challenge that calls into question not only the current ways of parliamentary organisation but also the very model of political representation, suggesting something unprecedented and that here can only be roughly assumed: a progressive transition towards a new hybrid representative model in which, as an evolution of the multidimensionality of political representation already operating in many different ways and also occurring in non-electoral contexts (Rehfeld, 2009), multiple patterns of representation coexist and interact with each other.

In such a conceptual model, alongside traditional generalist political representation, a particular role should be played by specialised, temporary or object-oriented representative forms designed to reinterpret, in the digital age, a trustee model of representation (Leston-Bandeira, 2012) so as to particularly convey the patrimony of technical and scientific knowledge—in itself resistant to the logic of political mediation and traditional representative delegation—directly into parliamentary

decision-making processes. Virtual parliaments could be a privileged channel through which technical and scientific knowledge would receive a public arena for discussion in a way that only parliaments can provide, sheltering it from exclusive contamination with the decision-making biases of executive power.

However, the hybridisation of representative democracy and digital democracy is not a self-evident or necessarily desirable process, and can only make sense if it can lead to an ecosystem in which, compared to the current situation, the advantages of the entry of the virtual dimension into the life of parliaments can be concretely measured in a number of areas in which parliaments are still being challenged and have so far failed to respond with traditional instruments. This should be measured by ascertaining the degree to which virtual parliamentary activities are shown to expand the spectrum of representation: (i) giving a stronger voice to minority groups or those living in remote or disadvantaged areas; (ii) helping to overcome gender representation disparity; (iii) encouraging intergenerational rebalancing in representative processes; (iv) enabling parliaments to become the connection point between new knowledge and new citizenships and the place where emerging digital rights are fully consolidated and digital risks are carefully assessed; (v) and offering science—especially in post-legislative scrutiny, given its aptitude to promote the evaluation of laws' implementation in a non-partisan and de-politicised manner (Norton, 2019 *a,b*)—a channel through which to engage in a political decision-making context where, unlike the executive, accountability is never separated from publicity and transparency.

What seems likely at the moment, anyway, is the progressive overcoming, in the next decades, of the Enlightenment idea of the 'encyclopaedic' parliament—based on the presumption that political knowledge is all-encompassing compared to specialised knowledge—and of parliament as a universal 'library' that aspires to fully reflect the human knowledge accumulation in a given territorial context and in a defined time frame (i.e., the electoral cycle between one election and another).

How far these transformations will go in terms of the way parliaments interpret their role will depend on how they are able to seize the window of opportunity offered by the digital challenges in increasing the scope of their representative offering. A merely incidental and unaware approach to the potential of digital tools could end up widening the gap between parliaments and society and further marginalise their position in a framework of growing technodemocracy, whereas a proactive approach—in a future that is not yet around the corner but needs to be planned right now—could drive the evolution towards an idea of parliament as a physical hub placed at the centre of wider virtual representative networks capable of accentuating the proximity of representation of the individual MP (Manzella, 2020).

The enlargement of the democratic representative environment to virtual forms of representation will be evaluated by the degree to which the new model

of representation will show the potential to stimulate mutually beneficial communicative collaboration. Such an evolution would bring to its natural consequence what has long been observed by scholars regarding the need for the singular and linear conception of political representation to give way to 'new spaces of public self-representation' (Coleman, 2005).

Whether and to what extent these non-empirical predictions are meant to come true will become verifiable in the coming years, and a solid empirical investigation will be needed to support the hypotheses outlined here. But it will not only be a matter of observing empirical data in the future experience of parliaments. It will also, and above all, be a question, in accordance with the constitutional science method, of systematising those empirical data and checking how far political choices will have been addressed to encourage parliaments to keep up with the times.

On those choices the ability to guide parliaments towards new and more responsive models of representation reflecting the complexity of current times will depend.

The ultimate challenge to be faced in redesigning the future of parliaments could be imagining that a core of electoral political representation can be contaminated and surrounded by a plurality of participatory and non-electoral representative processes, and that a new idea of delocalised and networked representation is possible, thanks to which—to quote Borges' visionary words for his 'parliament of the world' (Borges, 1971)—in the future there might be no place where parliaments will not be present.

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